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Kerala Urban Policy 2026–2050: Vision, Transparency, and the Need for a Rights-Based Urban Future | Jos Chathukulam

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Abstract

The Kerala Urban Policy 2026–2050, released as a 37-page document by the Local Self Government Department of the Government of Kerala in February 2026, presents a long-term roadmap for managing the state’s transition toward an increasingly urban society. This article critically evaluates the policy’s vision, conceptual foundations, governance framework, environmental commitments, and transparency concerns. The critique is based solely on the publicly available 37-page document; therefore, some observations may reflect the absence of access to the full report submitted earlier to the Government. While the policy demonstrates strengths in climate-sensitive planning and decentralised governance, it reveals conceptual gaps in rights-based urbanism and Doughnut Economics–based planning. The article argues that transparency, theoretical depth, and integration of global sustainability models are essential to enhance the policy’s transformative potential.

Key Words: *The Kerala Urban Policy 2026–2050, Right to the City, Doughnut Economics-Based Planning, Inclusive Urban Governance, Democratic Planning, Rights-Based Urban Future, Henri Lefebvre, and Kate Raworth.*

Introduction

Urban transformation is one of the defining challenges of the twenty-first century. In India, rapid urbanisation has often occurred without integrated planning, leading to ecological stress and infrastructural deficits. Against this backdrop, the Kerala Urban Policy 2026–2050 represents an ambitious attempt by the Government of Kerala to frame a long-term and scientifically grounded urban strategy.

The publicly available version of the policy is a 37-page document released in February 2026. It outlines a broad vision for “scientific, inclusive, climate-resilient and economically vibrant” urban development extending to 2050. The policy was reportedly prepared through extensive consultations before being submitted to the Government in 2025. However, nearly one year after submission, the complete report has not been placed in the public domain. This analysis is therefore based solely on the 37-page released document,

and it must be acknowledged that certain omissions identified here may reflect the absence of access to the full report, nevertheless, urban policy funded by public money must be open to public scrutiny. Transparency is fundamental to democratic planning.

Urbanisation in Kerala: Context and Structural Change

Kerala exhibits a distinctive urban morphology characterised by dispersed settlements and corridor-based development. The policy recognises that “urban characteristics are spreading across the state beyond statutory town limits,” signalling the emergence of an urban continuum. This observation marks a significant conceptual shift away from rigid rural-urban binaries. The document anticipates that by 2050, a substantial majority of Kerala’s population will reside in urban-like areas. This transition demands integrated spatial planning, improved infrastructure, and strengthened governance mechanisms. Kerala’s ecological vulnerability—bounded by the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats—intensifies the urgency for climate-responsive urban frameworks.

Climate Resilience and Environmental Commitments

The policy foregrounds “climate-smart urban infrastructure” and emphasises scientific land use planning, ecological protection, and disaster preparedness. It acknowledges the state’s vulnerability to floods, landslides, and coastal erosion, underscoring the need for resilience-oriented development. However, while the policy articulates environmental goals clearly, it lacks detailed ecological ceilings, enforceable zoning mechanisms, and measurable sustainability targets in the publicly available version. Without clearly defined indicators and regulatory mechanisms, climate resilience risks remaining aspirational rather than operational.

Governance Reform and Decentralisation

The document builds upon Kerala’s strong tradition of decentralised governance. It calls for strengthening urban local governments, enhancing institutional capacity, and ensuring responsive service delivery. The emphasis on participation and transparency aligns with the state’s history of local self-government reforms. Yet participation is framed largely as procedural consultation rather than as a structural right. The policy does not explicitly ground urban governance in a rights-based framework.

The Absence of the Right to the City

The concept of the “Right to the City,” introduced by Henri Lefebvre(1968), asserts that urban inhabitants possess a collective right to shape and appropriate urban space. This framework moves beyond participation toward democratic ownership of urban transformation. Although the Kerala Urban Policy emphasises inclusivity, it does not explicitly articulate urban space as a right. Embedding the Right to the City within the policy could have strengthened protections against displacement and commodification of land, particularly in the context of rapid corridor-based urbanisation.

Doughnut Economics and Global Urban Practice

Another significant omission in the publicly available document is the absence of Doughnut Economics as a guiding framework. Developed by Kate Raworth (2017 & 2020), the Doughnut model proposes that sustainable development must operate within two boundaries: a social foundation that guarantees minimum human well-being and an ecological ceiling that prevents environmental collapse.

By not explicitly connecting urban planning to this framework, the Kerala Urban Policy misses an opportunity to position itself at the forefront of global sustainability discourse. Several cities around the world have begun integrating Doughnut principles into planning processes.

For instance, Amsterdam formally adopted the Doughnut model in 2020 as part of its post-pandemic recovery strategy. Amsterdam’s “City Doughnut” framework assesses urban policies against both social thresholds and ecological boundaries, guiding decisions on housing, circular economy initiatives, and carbon reduction. Similarly, Brussels has incorporated Doughnut-inspired indicators into its regional sustainability strategy, aligning economic recovery plans with planetary boundaries. Copenhagen has also explored Doughnut frameworks in urban sustainability dialogues, integrating circular economy principles consistent with Raworth’s model.

These examples demonstrate that Doughnut Economics is not merely theoretical; it is increasingly operational in municipal governance. Kerala, with its strong human development achievements, environmental sensitivity, and the legacy of people’s planning, could have adopted or

adapted such a framework to define ecological ceilings and social guarantees for its urban future. The absence of this integration does not negate the policy's sustainability intent, but it limits its global positioning as an innovative model of systemic urban planning.

Financial and Implementation Considerations

The 37-page document outlines ambitious goals for infrastructure development, improved service delivery, and institutional reform. However, it does not provide detailed fiscal pathways or phased implementation strategies. Long-term urban transformation requires predictable revenue systems, strengthened municipal finance, and measurable milestones. Without clear financial strategies and monitoring frameworks, a 25-year roadmap risks losing momentum across political cycles.

Transparency and Democratic Accountability

A critical concern remains the limited public accessibility of the full policy report. Nearly one year after its submission to the Government, only the 37-page version is publicly available. If public funds were used to commission the report, democratic principles require full disclosure.

This critique must again clarify that it is based solely on the 37-page February 2026 document. It is possible that the complete report contains additional conceptual frameworks, financial details, or implementation mechanisms not reflected here. However, until the full report is made public, democratic debate remains constrained. Transparency is not peripheral to urban governance; it is foundational.

Conclusion

The Kerala Urban Policy 2026–2050 represents a bold attempt to frame long-term urban transformation in a state undergoing structural transition. It recognises the emergence of an urban continuum, emphasises climate resilience, and calls for institutional reform. However, the policy's transformative capacity could be significantly enhanced by embedding a rights-based framework inspired by Henri Lefebvre's Right to the City and by integrating Doughnut Economics as articulated by Kate Raworth. Examples from Amsterdam, Brussels, and Copenhagen demonstrate that Doughnut-based city planning is both feasible and globally relevant. Most urgently, the full report underlying the policy must be placed in the public domain to

uphold transparency and democratic accountability. Only through openness, conceptual clarity, and measurable implementation can Kerala position itself as a genuine leader in sustainable and inclusive urban governance.

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